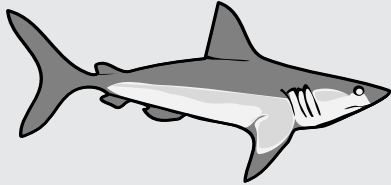




Tortugas 2000

<http://fpac.fsu.edu/tortugas>



Next Steps in the Tortugas 2000 Process

As the final phases of the Tortugas 2000 process approach, stay tuned to our website for up-to-date information. Be sure to make your voice heard during the public comment period!

March 2000:

Release of the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS) for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve. This document will describe the Reserve and its potential benefits and impacts (see related story). Public comment period and congressional review of the DSEIS begin.

March/April 2000:

Public hearings on the DSEIS for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve. (See related story for more information.)

May 2000:

Public comment period closes. Revise DSEIS based on public input.

June/July 2000:

Publish and distribute Final SEIS.

August 2000:

Implement the Tortugas Ecological Reserve.

Want To Know More?

If you would like more information on Tortugas 2000, please contact:

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Sanctuary Advisory Council Approves Tortugas Reserve Proposal

On June 15, 1999, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) unanimously approved the Tortugas 2000 working group's proposed reserve boundaries without changes.

"The Tortugas 2000 proposal represents unprecedented cooperation among conservationists, commercial and recreational fishing representatives, and others with a stake in the future of the Tortugas. We commend the working group for their success in reaching a compromise that will create a world-class ecological reserve," said SAC chair Fran Decker, citizen-at-large representative for the Middle Keys.

The Tortugas 2000 working group, a 24-member panel representing commercial and recreational fishing, diving, conservation, research, citizens-at-large, and agencies with jurisdiction in the Tortugas, spent more than a year developing its proposal based on the best available scientific and socioeconomic information.

The SAC voted to reconvene the Tortugas 2000 working group if either NOAA, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, the State of Florida, or the National Park Service elect to change the proposed reserve. "The working group developed the reserve boundaries to meet the goals of preserving diversity of species and sustaining key fisheries. Implementing the reserve as proposed will protect the reserve's ability to meet these goals and honor the hard-won compromise reached by the working group," Decker said.

A map of the proposed reserve boundaries may be found on the Tortugas 2000 website (<http://fpac.fsu.edu/tortugas>) or by contacting Ben Haskell at (305) 743-2437 x25.

The Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement

When the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS) is completed for public review, it will be distributed to elected officials, agencies, interest groups, and individuals who request a copy. Copies will also be placed in Monroe County libraries for public review. A notice will be published in the Federal Register and in local news media to announce the availability of the DSEIS. The DSEIS will also be available on the Tortugas 2000 website at <http://fpac.fsu.edu/tortugas>.

Distribution of the DSEIS will initiate a 60-day public review period during which comments on the document will be accepted by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary staff. Public hearings will also be held during this period to give people a chance to provide oral comments on the content of the DSEIS.

The DSEIS is a supplement to the Environmental Impact Statement which was prepared on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary in 1996. The DSEIS will address only the proposed boundaries and regulations for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve.

The DSEIS will have six main parts:

Part 1 explains the purpose and need for the proposed action. This part forms the basis for selecting the alternatives that are considered in establishing the reserve.

Part 2 describes the affected environment.

Part 3 presents the alternatives that were analyzed as the establishment of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve was considered. An important component of Part 3 will be a comparison of these alternatives and a summary of their environmental and socioeconomic effects, so the differences between them are clear.

Part 4 provides a description of the environment that will be affected, including both the environmental and socioeconomic conditions in the area being considered for designation as the Tortugas Ecological Reserve.

Part 5 discusses the results of the consideration of the impacts of each of the alternatives.

Part 6 presents a management plan for the reserve.

The DSEIS is being prepared consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). After the public comment period ends, Sanctuary staff will prepare a Final Supplement Environmental Impact Statement which will be considered prior to establishing the final boundaries and regulations for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve.

Riley's Hump

The Sanctuary's Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for Tortugas 2000 will propose bringing full protection to an area of critical reef habitat known as Riley's Hump.

Riley's Hump is not known for spectacular coral formations, but for its richness of fish and other marine life. Evidence suggests that this low profile reef is a spawning site for snapper-grouper species, including gray, cubera, mutton, dog, red and yellowtail snapper, black grouper and ocean triggerfish.

Because Riley's Hump is upcurrent from the Florida Keys reef tract, protecting these spawning sites may help to preserve fish and marine life stocks downstream in the Keys. The recommendation to protect Riley's Hump came from commercial fishing representatives on the Tortugas 2000 working group seeking to ensure the health of commercially important species.

Riley's Hump also is home to a colorful array of reef fish, including some species not commonly seen in the Florida Keys. A small population of sargassum or red-tailed triggerfish is among the unique species found in the area. Large pelagics may be seen cruising the region, lured by the warm water and powerful current of the Gulf Stream.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council already has closed Riley's Hump two months a year to protect mutton snapper while they spawn. The Sanctuary is asking the Council to extend this protection year-round, in consideration of the area's ecological importance. The proposed reserve would extend into deep water to the south encompassing important habitat for red and goldeye snapper, tilefish, golden crab and snowy grouper.

Overfishing is not the only threat facing Riley's Hump. Large freighters, now prohibited from anchoring on Tortugas Bank, use Riley's as a safe place to anchor between runs. The several ton anchors from these freighters wreak havoc on the coral reef. Because the Gulf Council lacks the authority to regulate anchoring by non-fishing vessels and to restrict ship discharges, the Tortugas 2000 plan proposes including Riley's Hump as a non-contiguous addition to the Sanctuary.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK:

Public comment period on the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve begins this spring

Members of the public with an interest in the future of the Tortugas area will again have the opportunity to make their opinions known. The public comment period for the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve begins this spring in conjunction with the release of the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the reserve.

Similar to the Tortugas 2000 scoping period held in November 1998, the public will be able to offer their comments on the proposed reserve in a variety of ways, including through the internet, by mail, and by attending one of several special meetings organized for just that purpose.

"We received more than 200 scoping comments on the Tortugas proposal last year, and are hoping for even more public input now that there is a plan to sink one's teeth into," reports Ben Haskell, Sanctuary Science Coordinator and project director for Tortugas 2000.

Public meetings are being scheduled for Key West, Marathon, Miami, Sarasota, and Washington, DC. These hearings will be held jointly with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as this agency will be responsible for promulgating fishing regulations in State waters which make up the majority of the proposed reserve area. In addition, representatives from the National Park Service will be present at all meetings to provide information about the status of planning in the Dry Tortugas National Park. Stay tuned to the Tortugas 2000 website (<http://fpac.fsu.edu/tortugas>) and future updates for exact meeting dates and times. We look forward to hearing from you!



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Tortugas 2000 Milestones

May 22, 1999

The Tortugas 2000 Working Group comes to consensus on a preferred alternative for the Tortugas Ecological Reserve.

June 15, 1999

The FKNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council unanimously approves the Tortugas 2000 Working Group's recommendation for a no-take ecological reserve with two components and forwards this recommendation to NOAA and the State of Florida.

November 9, 1999

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council votes unanimously to consider creating a no-fishing area for those portions of the proposed reserve in their jurisdiction.

December 9, 1999

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission meets in Islamorada and directs its staff to move forward on creating a no-fishing area for those portions of the proposed reserve in state waters. The Commission also agrees to hold joint public hearings with NOAA.

